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REMARKS BY U.S. AMBASSADOR MARCIA BERNICAT

USAID's ENHANCED COASTAL FISHERIES IN BANGLADESH, 2014–2019: PROJECT LAUNCH EVENT

October 21, 2015
Pan Pacific Sonargaon, Dhaka

- Honorable Minister of Fisheries and Livestock, Muhammed Sayedul Hoque;
- Director General for the Department of Fisheries, Syed Arif Azad;
- Dr. Patrick Dugan, Dr. Craig Meisner, and esteemed colleagues;
- Distinguished guests, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen:

Assalamu aleikum, nomoshkar, and good morning! Thank you for joining us today!

Over the past two decades, Bangladesh has made tremendous progress in developing its natural resources for the benefit of its people. Since 1997, the U.S. Government and Government of Bangladesh have partnered to establish collaborative management—or co-management—systems for protected forests and wetlands, including the precious Sundarbans mangrove forest. Through these people-centered biodiversity conservation initiatives, I am proud to say that *Conservation is Development*¹.

Hilsha fisheries have played an important role in the transformational growth of Bangladesh into a lower middle-income economy. Your “national fish of Bangladesh” is an important source of nutrition, provides jobs to half a million artisanal fishers, and supports an

¹ *#ConservationisDevelopment* is the theme of USAID's Biodiversity Campaign (2014-2015).

additional two million jobs in its value chain. In fact, its economic value across Bangladesh, Burma and India is estimated at \$2 billion. In Bangladesh, the Hilsha fishery accounts for approximately 1.5 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). That's a lot of fish!

But despite these successes, the long-term sustainability remains vulnerable to a variety of internal and external forces. Overfishing, pollution, and the loss of essential fish habitats through siltation and upstream water diversion projects all threaten this culturally significant and economically important fishery. There is still a great deal to be done to improve the resilience² of the Meghna River ecosystem and communities reliant on coastal fisheries.

As many as 30 million Bangladeshis still live in extreme poverty—earning less than \$1.25 per day. These families suffer from chronic vulnerability to shocks and stresses. Most do not enjoy three meals a day nor are they eating a balanced diet. In far too many rudimentary fishing villages along the banks of the Meghna River, extreme poverty rates exceed 85-90 percent. Moreover, these vulnerable households lack access to critical health and education services, are burdened by predatory loan sharks, and are highly vulnerable to natural hazards such as cyclones, floods and erosion of land upon which they precariously live.

This is why the United States Government has been working to eradicate extreme poverty and promote democratic, resilient communities since the time of Bangladesh's independence—and why we remain committed, in a variety of ways, to addressing sustainable co-management of natural resources, which now includes the coastal river ecosystem.

Globally, three billion people rely on coastal and marine fisheries for protein. However, oceans face many challenges that threaten the sustainability of marine fisheries, including overfishing, pollution and ocean acidification. That is why Secretary of State John Kerry convened the Our Oceans Conference in June 2014 and, earlier this month, attended the Our Oceans 2015 Conference in Chile. Protecting rivers, oceans and wetland areas is not only important for conserving biodiversity, it provides people with a critically important source of income and nutrition. This is true in Bangladesh and it is true throughout the world.

We are here today to officially launch the Enhanced Coastal Fisheries in Bangladesh (ECOFISH) project. This five-year, \$15 million initiative is funded by the U.S.

² USAID defines resilience as “the ability of people, households, communities, countries and systems (social, economic, ecological) to mitigate, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth.

Agency for International Development and is implemented in partnership with WorldFish and the Bangladesh Department of Fisheries. ECOFISH aims to improve the resilience of the Meghna River ecosystem and communities reliant on coastal fisheries. ECOFISH will improve fisheries science for decision making, strengthen fisheries adaptive co-management, and enhance the resilience of communities that depend upon Hilsha fish for their livelihoods.

ECOFISH will build on the success of the Government of Bangladesh's Hilsha Fish Conservation Program—which focuses on protecting female and juvenile hilsha fish and compensating fishers during periods when hilsha fishing is banned. ECOFISH will advise local communities on how to manage designated fish sanctuaries and marine protected areas collaboratively with government. ECOFISH will also address socio-economic vulnerability of fishing communities by establishing savings schemes for extremely poor women, offering long-term alternative income generation opportunities for women, and sharing value-added techniques and technologies to retain the highest possible value for each fish caught—and ensure that extra value remains in the community.

It is our sincere hope that ECOFISH will help to establish of a Hilsha Conservation Fund that could tap into market-based payments for ecosystem services and ensure the equitable and transparent transfer of these funds toward fisheries management and community resilience interventions long beyond the project's lifespan.

This is a very ambitious agenda. But looking around this this room of esteemed government officials, scientists and leaders of civil society, I am confident that ECOFISH will result in a number of successful outcomes.

I am pleased all of you could join us today for this very important event. Your commitment to the ECOFISH vision of a more resilient river ecosystem and Hilsha-fishing communities will serve to demonstrate a global model for fisheries co-management.

I look forward to continuing this dialogue and partnership with you and your organizations in the coming months and years.

Thank you all very much.

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**As prepared for delivery*